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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Yiangou, G. S. (2002). The accession of Cyprus to the EU: challenges and opportunities for the new European regional order. *JEMIE - Journal on ethnopolitics and minority issues in Europe*, 2, 1-13. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-62147>

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The Accession of Cyprus to the EU: Challenges and Opportunities for the New European Regional Order

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Issue 2/2002

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With its GDP per capita being high enough and already approaching Western Europe averages, the Republic of Cyprus appears to be one of the best candidates for European Union (EU) membership and its negotiators are making rapid progress in accession negotiations with Brussels. Yet, the continuing stand-off between the island's Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot community raises questions as to the exact status under which Cyprus will soon accede to the EU. The article addresses this problem and outlines what seems most likely to happen with the signing of the accession agreement. Given that the issue might crucially affect the way the European order of the near future will be shaped, the article also discusses the implications Cyprus' accession could possibly have on EU-Turkey relations and the future of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

I. Introduction

While all eyes have generally been focused on the new phase of enlargement of the European Union (EU), the imminent signing of the agreement for the accession of Cyprus has begun to demand urgent attention. It is still rather surprising that most discussions on the nature of what is expected to be the new European regional order limit themselves to the cost of enlargement and public support whereas the significance of the seemingly intractable 'Cyprus Problem' is rarely mentioned in this context. This article examines the unavoidable dilemmas European policy-makers are confronted with regarding the status of Cyprus' full EU membership. It then addresses the question of what consequences the accession of the island might have on vital issues such as the development of EU-Turkey relations and the diplomatic efforts to get in place the arrangements for the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Because it would be imprudent to search for final answers, the article can simply hope to improve scholarly awareness and understanding of the issues involved. Therefore, it proceeds by way of suggestion rather than conclusive argument and any 'raw building blocks of evidence' are disposed in such a manner as to move propositions forward.

II. Cyprus' EU Membership as a Catalyst for a Solution to the Island's Political Problem

But how can such a small island situated in the north-western tip of the Mediterranean be so important to EU politics? To answer this question one has to start by outlining what has become known as the 'Cyprus Problem'. The Republic of Cyprus was established at independence in 1960. But power sharing and political cooperation between majority Greek- and minority Turkish-Cypriots quickly broke down, leading to a decade of sporadic but intense ethnic violence. Following a Turkish military invasion in 1974 there ensued an internal movement of populations with Greek-Cypriots fleeing south from the advancing Turkish army and Turkish-Cypriots gathering in the north. By the end of 1975 Turkish-Cypriots (comprising 18 per cent of the population) held some 37 per cent of the island north of a divide line and were backed by a garrison of 30,000 Turkish troops and a steady stream of mainland Turkish settlers. Despite the catastrophic consequences for their community, Greek-Cypriots took comfort from the fact that, unlike the Turkish Cypriot administration, the government of the Republic of Cyprus (now exclusively in Greek-Cypriot hands) continued to be recognized as the legitimate government of the island and, therefore, retained the advantages of international legitimacy and access. Repeated diplomatic efforts to find a political solution that would reconcile Greek-Cypriot demands for restoration with Turkish-Cypriot insistence that the 'sovereignty' and security of its community be guaranteed ended in failure. Having been frustrated with what they perceived to be the lack of Turkish-Cypriot political will to regulate the problem, Greek-Cypriots gradually began to emphasize the prospect of EU (then European Community, EC) membership for the whole of Cyprus in the hope that this could provide a sufficient framework for resolving the island's enduring communal dispute. By the same token in 1990 the government of the Republic of Cyprus applied for EU membership.

The situation in Cyprus headed towards another serious crisis when in 1993 the European Commission concluded that the Republic of Cyprus' application for EU membership was made in the name of the whole island (namely both Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots). Brussels' decision to accept the candidacy of Cyprus provoked the angry reaction of the Turkish-Cypriot leadership, which claimed that the government of the Republic of Cyprus did not have the right to apply for membership without

consulting it. The Turkish-Cypriots also made it abundantly clear that they would never agree to Cyprus joining a grouping of countries of which Greece was a member but Turkey was not. The issue had regional implications, too, because Greek and Turkish interests and policies on the EU-Cyprus membership issue ran counter to each other. While being warmly received by the Greek government, the decision of the European Commission provoked a host of threats by the Turkish government who went as far as to claim that regional stability would be severely jeopardized by Cyprus accession to the EU. To counter these threats EU officials tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to use the prospect of EU membership to make an eventual settlement of the political problem more attractive to the Turkish-Cypriots. To this end they argued that Turkish-Cypriots would reap the considerable benefits of EU citizenship and benefit disproportionately in economic terms.

In the expectation of significant progress in the United Nations (UN) talks for a settlement, the European Commission finally decided to consider Cyprus as eligible for membership. In March 1995 the General Affairs Council confirmed the island's suitability and established that accession negotiations with Cyprus would start six months after the end of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC). A structured dialogue was also initiated in order to reveal areas where Cyprus had to make efforts to adapt to the EU's legal system and policies. At the same time top officials of several member states stated unequivocally that they would not welcome Cyprus in the EU before the political problem on the island was comprehensively resolved.

In 1997 the European Council in Luxembourg confirmed that accession negotiations would begin in the spring of 1998 and the Turkish-Cypriots were invited to participate in the Cypriot delegation. Turkish-Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş, however, flatly refused President Glafcos Clerides' invitation for Turkish-Cypriots to join the island's negotiating team and reiterated his position that he opposed accession into the EU, fearing it would downgrade Turkey's presence on the island and relegate the Turkish-Cypriot community to a minority status. Despite the Turkish-Cypriot refusal to take any part, accession negotiations started in March 1998 while substantial talks for the adoption and the implementation of the EU legislation began a few months later.

III. The Helsinki Summit in December 1999

But Cyprus' EU membership, initially conceived by European and other diplomats as a catalyst for a solution, now emerged as a serious headache for the EU. For its part, Turkey had made it clear that it would annex the northern part of Cyprus if the EU admitted the Greek-Cypriots as the Republic of Cyprus without a settlement. On the other hand, Greece had threatened to use its veto power over EU enlargement unless the Republic of Cyprus was included in the first wave of enlargement. A glimmer of hope arose with the European Council meeting in Helsinki in December 1999. Parallel to its recognition of Turkey as a candidate for membership (with Greece's blessing) the EU implicitly confirmed that the solution of the Cyprus problem was no longer a prerequisite for the admission of Cyprus:

The Council underlines that a political settlement will facilitate the accession of Cyprus to the European Union. If no settlement has been reached by the completion of accession negotiations, the Council's decision on accession will be made without the above being a precondition. In this the Council will take account for all relevant factors.
(EU Archives 2000).

The Helsinki outcome was meant to serve multiple purposes. The promise that the division of Cyprus would not be an obstacle to EU membership was made mainly to appease Greece (by refusing to negotiate, the Turkish side could no longer block Cyprus' accession to the EU)¹ and enable the bloc to nominate more candidates for membership, thus making sure that enlargement would indeed happen. The decision to offer candidacy to Turkey primarily aimed to reinforce Turkey's European orientation and provide a strong incentive for Ankara to pursue economic, political and human rights reform. Given that Turkey was perhaps the party which held the key to a political solution in Cyprus, its own accession prospects would encourage it to soften its tone over the issue. Helsinki also intended to eliminate much of the deep resentment that many Turks felt toward the EU following the December 1997 Luxembourg summit's rejection of Turkey's candidacy, and bolster Greek-Turkish relations.

¹ The decision essentially meant that the EU refused to hand Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriots a tactical advantage by making Cyprus' accession conditional on a settlement – in this way, by refusing to negotiate, the Turkish side would be rewarded with the ability to block Cyprus' accession to the EU.

IV. Negotiations to Resolve the Political Problem of Cyprus after Helsinki: Yet Another Deadlock

The Helsinki decision was evidently built on a delicate and fragile balance with Turkey and Greece, each assuming that the other would ultimately step back from the brink. The evolution of Greece-Turkey relations following the Helsinki summit was remarkable and Greek and Turkish foreign ministers George Papandreou and Ismail Cem engaged in their version of a rapprochement. Many of the bilateral agreement – on trade and investment, organized crime, illegal immigration, tourism and the environment – the two countries signed were substantively significant. But perhaps even more important was the demonstration of the two neighbours' common interests even in sensitive foreign policy issues such as that of Cyprus. As Hikmet Cetin, a former Turkish foreign minister put it, "people in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus now see that the two governments can deal with each other in a positive way" (cited in Gordon 2000: 8).

Under these circumstances in August 2000 the UN launched proximity talks to try and bring the two communities of Cyprus together. But despite the newly found optimism of everybody involved in the Cyprus conflict those talks broke down in November 2000, when Turkish-Cypriot leader Denktash – having received the backing of Ankara – walked out in protest at not being recognized as a legitimate head of government. Denktash adamantly insisted on his ideas of a confederation (that is of two states) something which went against the wish of the EU (and the Greek-Cypriots) that Cyprus remained one state.

What appeared to be a brief 'honeymoon' effectively ended with the breakdown of the talks. Greece promptly reconfirmed its threat of a veto while Turkey hardened its own stance by proposing a two-state formula for Cyprus. Turkish foreign minister Cem unveiled the new Turkish position during a Turkey-European parliamentary committee meeting in June 2001 and said that the Turkey-EU relationship would face serious setbacks if Cyprus became an EU member without a solution (Dogan 2001).

The collapse of talks was not received well by the EU. A settlement might have no longer been a precondition for Cyprus' accession, but failure to reach one by the time the island was due to join was not the optimal choice of several EU member states given the problems such a scenario would introduce into the EU. After a long period of inactivity, and following intense diplomatic efforts, in December 2001

Denktash agreed to resume the talks, reportedly at the urging of the Turkish General Staff and Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit. With the Republic of Cyprus demonstrating its ability to assume the obligations of membership and nearing the successful completion of the negotiating process, Clerides and Denktash started to meet as representatives of their communities, and set June 2002 as a deadline for the conclusion of the talks. The resumption of negotiations eased tensions at a time when Turkish-EU relations appeared to be heading for a crisis. Hopes were once again expressed that the talks would have a positive outcome, which would prove beneficial both for the Greek- and the Turkish-Cypriot community in view of the island's EU accession. But after three rounds of direct negotiation under UN auspices and despite the visit to Cyprus of the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan as part of his Good Offices Mission, the target of reaching a settlement by June 2002 has evidently not been met. Although no-one has openly admitted that the talks are in a deadlock, it is quite obvious that up to now there have not been such openings so that one might say there is substantial progress on the basic principles of the Cyprus issue.

V. The EU dilemma

Cyprus' EU membership, which for many circles in Europe initially appeared to offer the best hopes to help reintegrate the divided island, has now emerged as a pressing problem for the EU. From an objective point of view Cyprus leads all other countries seeking membership in the EU. As early as August 2001 it overtook the other candidate states in the number of 'chapters' of EU law it had closed during accession talks and now fulfils all the criteria for membership.² According to the road map of the European Commission endorsed by the European Council, the negotiations should be concluded before the end of 2002 and Cyprus is expected to be part of the first wave of acceding countries. But at the same time, despite the fact that the EU has repeatedly underlined that a political settlement would facilitate the accession of Cyprus (although this is not a precondition for accession), the necessary progress needed to make way for a solution has not yet been achieved. Moreover, it is far from clear that negotiations can be continued in earnest, let alone produce a solution that can avoid a "derailing" with the EU before 2004.

² For details on the accession talks refer to <http://www.ue.eu.int/en/Info/eurocouncil/index.htm>

While this seems rather convoluted, as things stand at the moment there is one logical conclusion to be drawn: a Cyprus settlement and EU membership are mutually exclusive. So the EU now finds itself in a particularly difficult position. Brussels is no longer convinced that the prospect of membership, which proved to be a strong incentive for many Central and Eastern European countries to proceed with political and economic transformation and the resolution of territorial and ethnic disputes, can produce similar results in Cyprus. However, although some leading EU figures doubt the wisdom of admitting a politically divided Cyprus, hamstrung by Greece's veto threat over the enlargement process,³ the EU apparently cannot disengage.

Speaking in Athens in March 2002, EU enlargement Commissioner Günter Verheugen said that Cyprus' EU accession, with or without a political solution, would strengthen stability in the eastern Mediterranean, dismissing Turkey's claim to the opposite. He also added that Cyprus is expected to sign its entry into the bloc by 2003, together with Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Malta. What, therefore, appears increasingly likely to happen is that, if the political problem is not regulated with the completion of the accession negotiations, Cyprus will accede as a whole *de jure* to the EU, while the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* would cover *de facto* the part of the island controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus. Such an outcome will inevitably have multiple political and security implications not only for Cyprus and the entire eastern Mediterranean region but also for the EU, particularly on a range of issues regarding EU-Turkey relations and the ESDP.

VI. The Accession of Cyprus and the Future of EU-Turkey Relations

Under pressure from the West, political and military elites in Turkey are split over how to react in the case Cyprus joins the EU before a political settlement is reached. There is a real danger, however, that if this is to happen Ankara will react emotionally and annex the northern part of Cyprus, something which, according to Commissioner Verheugen, will result in the cancellation of Turkey's accession process. There is of course also the possibility that Ankara will itself withdraw its application for EU

³ Greece, on the other hand, has repeatedly hinted that no enlargement can proceed without the inclusion of Cyprus. Athens could veto the accession of any other candidates should Cyprus be omitted.

membership. Either way, the EU-Turkey relations will be sent into a new tailspin. The developments will also determine if there is an element of truth in the conspiracy theories, which suggest that, despite the two sides' official rhetoric, the EU is simply pretending to offer membership to Turkey while for its part Turkey is merely pretending to negotiate accession to the EU.

Although they would be reluctant to admit it publicly, the suspension or withdrawal of Turkey's application following the accession of Cyprus could come as a relief to many people in the EU. There is little doubt that Turkey's continued failure to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria,⁴ particularly the condition which calls for "stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities" (Copenhagen European Council 1993: 17), has played into the hands of those who would not want Turkey to join the EU under any circumstances. Special cooperation agreements and a customs union between the EU and Turkey are one thing, but full membership does not look like a prospect existing members would exactly relish. At the same time, there is a suspicion that even those in the EU who sincerely support Ankara's candidacy do so in the knowledge that Turkish accession will not occur in the foreseeable future. In case Turkey's application is suspended or withdrawn, these same people will be spared the need to consider not just the social and cultural consequences but also the economic impact⁵ of taking in a (mostly Muslim) population of 65 million (two thirds of which live to the east of Ankara) with a per capita income of about 15 per cent of the EU average.⁶

But looking at the other side of the coin one must also acknowledge that the long-lasting Turkish desire to be allowed into the "European family of nations" runs parallel to a deep-rooted suspicion of European motives, which has intensified rather than diminished as Turkey has edged closer to EU membership. From the Turkish perspective, the EU's continued insistence that Ankara implement the freedoms envisaged under the Copenhagen criteria is not only baffling, but also suspect. At best, such insistence is seen as camouflage for religious and cultural prejudice. But

⁴ In 1993, the Copenhagen European Council ruled that an application for membership could take place as soon as an applicant is able to assume the obligations of membership by satisfying the *economic and political* conditions required.

⁵ Should Turkey join the EU, free movement of labour would see Turkey's population flood Europe while the burden on the EU to give Turkey substantial amounts of economic aid (given that the country would qualify for almost all kinds of subsidies) would be massive.

⁶ While Turkey is by far the largest of all the candidate countries, it must be noted that it is not the poorest (in terms of GDP it is ahead of Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Latvia).

many in both the Turkish political establishment and the country's powerful military genuinely believe that the EU is driven by more sinister motives.

The changes Turkey must make before membership talks can even commence under an "Accession Partnership Accord" are in many ways much tougher than for others, because of the sheer scale of its problems. There is, therefore, a genuine fear in Turkey that measures such as the lifting of restrictions on freedom of expression and the allowance of Kurdish-language broadcasts and education (both of which are long-standing European demands) would encourage Islamist and Kurdish nationalist sentiments, unleashing forces which would tear Turkish society apart. It should, nevertheless, also be stated that by granting such rights and freedoms, for the sake of EU membership, the powerful ruling elite of Turkey (and particularly the Turkish General Staff whose domination of security policy has often been cited by the EU as incompatible with the membership criteria regarding civilian control of the military), which has a firm grip on the country, would in effect be signing its own demise.

The impending accession of Cyprus might, therefore, provide the perfect opportunity for both the EU and Turkey to take a step back and rethink their positions *vis-à-vis* each another. How far and in which direction these relations will develop depends on how Turkey will act and how the EU will respond to Turkey. The hope, however, must remain that calm heads will prevail, that the Turkish reaction once Cyprus joins the EU will not sound the death knell of the country's own EU aspirations and that a (temporary) formula can be found which would enable Turkey and the EU to coexist and cooperate without the cohabitation that comes with full membership. In the medium term such an arrangement would give Turkey time to reconcile its desire for accession with its reluctance to embrace the values on which membership is supposedly based.

VII. The Accession of Cyprus and the Future of the ESDP

A lot has been written about the need for Europe to unite under one roof with a common law and institutions, a common currency, a single foreign policy and single defence arrangements if it is to fulfil its aspirations and become a strategic power in the world. But while the first three issues are either already in place or making steady progress, the matter of the proposed common EU military force is by and large bedevilled by the Cyprus problem (and the Greece-Turkey disputes over the Aegean).

Despite the fact that all the parties involved in the issue promised to do their best to put the ESDP arrangements in place in such a way so as to avoid friction between the EU and NATO, two organizations that have been the engine for the stabilization of Europe in the last fifty years, nothing concrete has yet been agreed. And there must be very little doubt that after the accession of Cyprus to the EU there might arise new complications which, in the worst case scenario, might even cause a transatlantic rift between the EU and the United States (US) in the approach to foreign affairs.

One of the hallmarks of the Helsinki summit was the decision to create by 2003 an independent 50,000 to 60,000 strong EU-led military capability. The European Council underlined its determination to develop an autonomous capacity to make decisions and, where NATO as a whole was not engaged, to launch and conduct EU-led military operations in response to international crises.⁷ The EU's proposed ESDP sought to give the EU the right to use NATO assets, without non-EU members of NATO (such as Turkey) having any effective say or veto in how they would be used. But Turkey's concern for its own security raised a new difficulty with the EU that looked like being particularly hard to resolve. Ankara, where the powerful military establishment still played a central role, steadfastly raised its opposition to the EU's nascent Rapid Reaction Force. Turkey, a NATO member, demanded full decision-making powers in operations that could affect Turkish interests while the EU was only willing to offer the Turks the right to 'close consultation'. Having been denied full participation in ESDP and fearing the possible involvement of the envisioned European force in Cyprus and the disputes with Greece over territorial waters in the Aegean, Turkey vetoed EU-NATO arrangements and blocked EU access to NATO assets and planning capabilities.

Annoyed by the Turkish veto, the Belgian and French foreign ministers warned Turkey that nothing could prevent progress toward a common European defence. The German government went further and hinted that Ankara's opposition to ESDP could dampen EU enthusiasm for future economic assistance. But not even a personal appeal from then US President Bill Clinton was enough to sway the Turks from their position. Turkey's announcement in December 2001 that it was withdrawing its objections to the formation of a European defence force came only after it had been

⁷ The EU could not go ahead without NATO's consent, partly to avoid undermining it, and partly because it needed to borrow its weapons and equipment.

assured by the UK that the force would not be deployed in Cyprus or (other) disputes between Greece and Turkey. Greece, however, refused to accept this agreement, which became known as the 'Ankara document'. Greek officials said that the fact that Turkey would have a say on how the EU force would operate in the Aegean or in relation to Cyprus would be to the detriment of Greece's national interests. Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis firmly resisted pressure from NATO Secretary-General Lord George Robertson and EU High Representative for Security and Defence Javier Solana to accept the 'Ankara document' and repeatedly stated that Greece could not accept the text. The deal under which Ankara agreed to allow the EU force to use NATO assets has, therefore, rapidly become a problem between Greece, EU and NATO and the disagreement has frozen the establishment of the force.

Legions of diplomats are now working overtime to try to solve this knotty problem. EU and NATO officials have expressed the hope that the issue will be solved before NATO's conference in Prague in November 2002 so that the new EU force takes command of peacekeeping operations in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia when US troops pull out later in the year. Such expectations, nonetheless, might as well be the triumph of hope over experience. It is evident that the impending signing of the agreement for the accession of Cyprus will further complicate the issue.

If the developments lead to a new crisis in EU-Turkey relations, the EU might go ahead with its plans for an independent EU military force but, this time around, without NATO's consent. Such a decision, however, would effectively limit the exercise of American power in Europe. It would, therefore, raise further questions as to how far a larger European regional order will have broader responsibilities or ambitions, something of course which is dependent on its relationship with the US. The relationship between the EU and NATO is fundamentally about the US and its position in Europe. And the question that no-one can answer at the moment is as to whether the EU can emerge as the main security organization for a larger Europe or whether NATO will remain as such. Would the ESDP attempt to replace NATO in the domain of security and defence? How would the EU respond to US (often hegemonic) foreign policy in the face of the forthcoming changes in Europe? Most of these issues would likely be decided on how relations between the larger EU and the US develop. But the fact of the matter remains that Cyprus might be one of the factors that will help the pendulum swing one way or another.

VIII. Conclusion

It is rather optimistic to expect that conditions will be conducive to a Cyprus settlement as we approach the signing of a full EU membership agreement. It is, therefore, likely that with the completion of the accession negotiations, Cyprus would accede as a whole *de jure* to the EU, while the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* would cover *de facto* the part of the island which is under the control of the internationally recognized government of the Republic of Cyprus. This development will have multiple implications not only for the region but the entire European continent, especially if Turkey reacts in a way that would place the larger European enlargement project in jeopardy.

Everyone must hope that Turkey will not overreact once the accession negotiations of Cyprus are completed and, thus, risk its own application for membership. If this happens, however, it might be possible that both the EU and Turkey decide that they can still work together albeit without the cohabitation which comes with full membership. In case the accord on EU-NATO relations was again blocked by Turkey as a reaction to the accession of Cyprus, the EU would have to think seriously about ways of getting round the problem. One possibility would be for the EU to strengthen its links with national planning staffs. It might be possible for the EU to run an autonomous operation through drawing on the expertise of such national planners. Yet, such a solution would certainly meet the scepticism of the US and in turn might force the redefinition of the EU-US relations.

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Biographical Note

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